

Practice Resurrection

A CONVERSATION
ON GROWING UP IN CHRIST

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WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.

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Published 2010 by
Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
2140 Oak Industrial Drive N.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49505 /
P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.
www.eerdmans.com

Published in association with the literary agency of
Alive Communications, Inc.,
7680 Goddard St., Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920
www.alivecommunications.com

Printed in the United States of America

16 15 14 13 12 11 10 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Peterson, Eugene H., 1932-
Practice resurrection: a conversation on growing up in Christ /
Eugene H. Peterson.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8028-2955-9 (cloth: alk. paper)

1. Bible. N.T. Ephesians — Commentaries. I. Title.

BS2695.53.P47 2010

227'.5077 — dc22

2009037051

“Looking for Mt. Monadnock,” reprinted from Robert Siegel, *The Waters Under the Earth* (Moscow: 2005), 70, by permission of Canon Press.

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Introduction

This is a conversation on becoming a mature Christian, Christian formation, growing up to the stature of Christ.

All of us are born. No exceptions. Birth brought us alive, kicking and crying, into a world that is vast, complex, damaged, demanding . . . and beautiful. In increments, day-by-day, we begin to get the hang of it. We drink from our mother's breast, go to sleep, and wake up. One day on waking up we stand upright and amaze everyone with our pedestrian acrobatics. It isn't long before we're old hands at language, using nouns and verbs with the best of them. We are growing up.

Jesus used the birth event as a metaphor for another kind of birth: becoming alive to God. Alive to God-alive. Life vast, complex, damaged, demanding . . . and beautiful. Alive to God's holiness, God's will, God's kingdom, power, and glory. There is more to life after birth than mother's milk, sleeping and waking, walking and talking. There is God.

Jesus introduced the birth metaphor in a conversation with rabbi Nicodemus one night in Jerusalem, telling him, "You must be born from above" (John 3:7). The metaphor can also be translated "born anew" (RSV) and "born again" (KJV). Nicodemus didn't understand the metaphor, didn't get it. Literalists, maybe especially religious literalists, have a difficult time with metaphors. A metaphor is a word that makes an organic connection from what you can see to what you can't see. In

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any conversation involving God, whom we can't see, metaphors are invaluable for keeping language vivid and immediate. Without metaphors we are left with colorless abstractions and vague generalities.

Jesus liked metaphors and used them a lot. "Born from above" is one of his most memorable. But as Jesus elaborated on his born-from-above metaphor (John 3:5-21), we can be fairly certain that Nicodemus did eventually get it, for the next time he is mentioned, playing a major role along with Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of the crucified body of Jesus (John 19:38-40), it looks very much as if he had decided to participate in the way of Jesus. Despite, or more likely because of, the metaphor, Nicodemus was born from above. And not only born, but growing. His presence at the burial is evidence that ever since that conversation with Jesus he had been growing, growing in understanding and participation, on his way to maturity in the world of God alive.

So, birth. Then growth. The most significant growing up that any person does is to grow as a Christian. All other growing up is a preparation for or ancillary to this growing up. Biological and social, mental and emotional growing is all ultimately absorbed into growing up in Christ. Or not. The human task is to become mature, not only in our bodies and emotions and minds within ourselves, but also in our relationship with God and other persons.

Growing up involves the work of the Holy Spirit forming our born-again spirits into the likeness of Christ. It is the work anticipated by St. Luke's sentence on John the Baptist. After the story of his birth we read: "the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly" (Luke 1:80). That is followed a page or so later by this sentence on Jesus, following the story of his birth: "and Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in divine and human favor" (Luke 2:52).¹ St. Paul uses a similar vocabulary in describing the agenda he sets out for Christians in the Ephesian letter: that we "come . . . to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of

1. Luke adapts his summary sentence on both John and Jesus from 1 Samuel 2:26: "Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with the people."

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Christ . . . grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:13, 15). Or, as I have translated it: “God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love — like Christ in everything . . . so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love” (*The Message*).

John grew up.

Jesus grew up.

Paul tells us, “Grow up.”

* * *

First birth and then growth. Neither metaphor stands alone. Birth presupposes growth, but growth proceeds from birth. Is it an exaggeration to say that birth has received far more attention in the American church than growth? I don’t think so. It is true that the metaphor of growth is used frequently, as in “church growth” and “growing churches.” But it is also obvious that the metaphor has been torn out of its origin in biology and emasculated into an abstract and soulless item of arithmetic, a usage as remote from the biblical soil as is imaginable — an outrageous perversion of the metaphor and responsible for an enormous distortion in the Christian imagination of what is involved in living in the kingdom of God.

For parents, birth is marked by joy and wonder and accompanied by birth announcements and gifts. The details, sparse as they are — weight: 6 pounds 10 ounces; length: 21 inches; name: Veronica Ann; date of birth: May 6 — are received with awed reverence. The euphoria of birth lasts a few weeks, considerably longer than the orgasm that accompanied its inception, but hardly indefinitely. For these same recently euphoric parents, growth is marked by fatigue, anxiety, panicked late-night calls to the doctor, confused decisions regarding discipline, worried conferences with teachers, puzzling over adolescent behavior and misbehavior. Birth is quick and easy (at least it seems that way to fathers — mothers have a different slant on it); growth is endless and complex.

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I have a good friend who, shortly after I met her — she was about forty years old at the time — told me that she grew up in Arkansas poverty in a harsh fundamentalist atmosphere in abusive circumstances. She escaped family and town for California, and when she was eighteen she became pregnant. She told me how she felt: absolutely ecstatic, this life growing within her. She had never felt more “herself.” She had meaning, she had joy, carrying in her womb this new, innocent, unspoiled life — this mystery. She was no longer religious in any conventional sense, but she was absolutely convinced, not a shadow of a doubt, that God had created and given her this life that was within her.

She gave birth to the baby. Sheer ecstasy, beauty, goodness. She had never felt so much alive, so uniquely herself. And then, after a few weeks, she fell apart. She knew nothing about life. She didn’t know what to do, was confused, bewildered, without bearings. She had no idea what to do with a baby. She started drinking and became an alcoholic. She went on to using cocaine and became an addict. It wasn’t long before she was a prostitute. She spent the next twenty years on the streets of San Francisco trying to keep herself and this baby alive.

And then one day she wandered into a church. The church was empty. She became a Christian. She didn’t know exactly how it happened, but she knew that it *had* happened. Another pregnancy. It was an act almost as casual and unintentional as when she had become pregnant with her baby boy. She didn’t yet know what it meant, but she knew that *that* was what she was. She was a Christian.

This time around she knew that she knew nothing about living, but she also knew that there wasn’t going to be any more hand-to-mouth living on drugs and alcohol and sex. After poking around a bit she discovered and embraced the Christian way and gave herself to growing up into Christ, which she has been doing ever since.

But do you know what she found most difficult? American churches. Not that she wasn’t welcomed. She was. She was something of a prize, a “brand plucked from the burning” — a Christian! But she also found that these American churches seemed to know everything about being born in Jesus’ name but seemed neither interested nor competent in matters of growing into the “measure of the full stature of Christ.”

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She looked around her and saw that her new friends were doing the same thing she had done earlier, only not so obviously. These churches seemed to her to be full of ideas and projects that they used as she had once used alcohol, drugs, and sex — to avoid God, to avoid being present to life, being present to neighbor. They were doing everything religious except following Jesus. They were feeding their most childish and adolescent impulses and refusing to take up the cross of Jesus. They were not growing up in Christ. Lots of doctrine, lots of Bible study, lots of moral and ethical concern, lots of projects. But it struck her as pretty thin soup. She was alarmed by the parallels to her former life and determined to live more sanely as a Christian than she had as a pagan.

It took her a while, but eventually she found a few friends, a teacher, a pastor. She now had companions to a life of growing up to the full stature of Christ, becoming mature.

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So — growing up “healthy in God, robust in love.” That is my subject: finding and living into the form of what one psalm translation terms “the beauty of holiness” (Ps. 29:2 KJV). The formation of our minds and spirits, our souls, our lives — our lives transformed, growing up strong in God, growing to maturity, to the stature of Christ.

We cannot overemphasize bringing men and women to new birth in Christ. Evangelism is essential, critically essential. But is it not obvious that growth in Christ is equally essential? Yet the American church has not treated it with an equivalent urgency. The American church runs on the euphoria and adrenaline of new birth — getting people into the church, into the kingdom, into causes, into crusades, into programs. We turn matters of growing up over to Sunday school teachers, specialists in Christian education, committees to revise curricula, retreat centers, and deeper life conferences, farming it out to parachurch groups for remedial assistance. I don’t find pastors and professors, for the most part, very interested in matters of formation in holiness. They have higher profile things to tend to.

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Americans in general have little tolerance for a centering way of life that is submissive to the conditions in which growth takes place: quiet, obscure, patient, not subject to human control and management. The American church is uneasy in these conditions. Typically, in the name of “relevance,” it adapts itself to the prevailing American culture and is soon indistinguishable from that culture: talkative, noisy, busy, controlling, image-conscious.

Meanwhile, what has in previous centuries and other cultures been a major preoccupation of the Christian community, becoming men and women who live to “the praise of God’s glory,” has become a mere footnote within a church that has taken on the agenda of the secular society — its educational goals, its activity goals, its psychological goals. By delegating character formation, the life of prayer, the beauty of holiness — growing up in Christ — to specialized ministries or groups, we remove it from the center of the church’s life. We disconnect growth from birth and, in effect, place it on a bench at the margins of the church’s life. Wendell Berry, one of our most perceptive prophets of contemporary culture and spirituality, wrote, “We think it ordinary to spend twelve or sixteen or twenty years of a person’s life and many thousands of public dollars on ‘education’ — and not one dime or a thought on character.”²

Plato formulated what he named the “universals” as the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. He held that if we are to live a whole and mature life, the three had to work together harmoniously in us. The American church has deleted Beauty from that triad. We are vigorous in contending for the True, thinking rightly about God. We are energetic in insisting on the Good, behaving rightly before God. But Beauty, the forms by which the True and the Good take shape in human life, we pretty much ignore. We delegate Beauty to flower arrangers and interior decorators. Plato, and many of our wisest teachers who have followed him, insisted that all three — Truth, Goodness, Beauty — are organically connected. Without Beauty, Truth and Goodness

2. Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), p. 26.

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have no container, no form, no way of coming to expression in human life. Truth divorced from Beauty becomes abstract and bloodless. Goodness divorced from Beauty becomes loveless and graceless.

If we need a formal term for this, “theological aesthetics” will do as well as any.

* * *

For most of my adult life I have protested this marginalization of matters of maturity, of spiritual formation, of theological aesthetics, of growing up in Christ “healthy in God, robust in love.” I have attempted to give witness to all that is involved in its practice. Without, I must say, much success.

I have not exactly been ignored, in fact I have been treated with much appreciation; but more often than not it feels like kindly condescension. Pastors tell me that they cannot make it with an agenda like this — theological *aesthetics*? People won’t put up with it, congregations will not put up with it. Not long ago a pastor who has made an art form of pole vaulting from church to church told me that I was wasting my time on this, there was no challenge to it, it was about as exciting as standing around watching paint dry.

I suggested to him that most of our ancestors in both Israel and church have spent most of their time watching the paint dry, that the persevering, patient, unhurried work of growing up in Christ has occupied the center of the church’s life for centuries, and that this American marginalization is, well, American. He dismissed me. He needed, he said, a challenge. I took it from his tone and manner that a challenge was by definition something that could be met and accomplished in forty days. That’s all the time, after all, that it took Jesus.

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For far too long now, with full backing from our culture, we have let the vagaries of our emotional needs call the shots. For too long we have let ecclesiastical market analysts set the church’s agenda. For too

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long we have stood by unprotesting as self-appointed experts on the Christian life have replaced the “full stature of Christ” with desiccated stick figures.

So what I want to do here is engage in an extended and serious conversation with my brother and sister Christians around the phrase “growing up in Christ.” And I want to bring an old and wise and trusted voice into the conversation, the voice of St. Paul, the man who coined the “growing up” metaphor. The words he wrote in a letter to a congregation of Christians in Ephesus two thousand years ago is as up-to-date as anything we are likely to hear these days, and strategically crucial for what faces us. I want him to have a major voice in the conversation.³

* * *

The resurrection of Jesus establishes the conditions in which we live and mature in the Christian life and carry on this conversation: Jesus alive and present. A lively sense of Jesus’ resurrection, which took place without any help or comment from us, keeps us from attempting to take charge of our own development and growth. Frequent meditation on Jesus’ resurrection — the huge mystery of it, the unprecedented energies flowing from it — prevents us from reducing the language of our conversation to what we can define or control. “Practice resurrection,” a phrase I got from Wendell Berry,⁴ strikes just the right note. We live our lives in the practice of what we do not originate and cannot anticipate. When we practice resurrection, we continuously enter into what is more than we are. When we practice resurrection, we keep company with Jesus, alive and present, who knows where we are going better than we do, which is always “from glory unto glory.”

3. Not all agree that Paul is the author of Ephesians, and I don’t insist on it. But to avoid the clutter of qualifications I will use the traditional “Paul” when referring to the author. A thorough and even-handed survey of all the considerations involved is in Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), pp. 6-35.

4. Wendell Berry, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” in *Collected Poems* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), pp. 151-52.